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Wendy Brandmark

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Abstract

It is easy to dismiss Jean Rhys's heroines as passive victims of men. Yet this passivity, so disturbing to the reader, is also a form of rebellion. Lacking the power to change their lives in a society which offered women without family or money few options, her women negate themselves. They say no not only to self-definition and an orderly life but to the bourgeois code, 'the soul-destroying middle' (p. 20). And it is with the soul, in particular the female soul, that Jean Rhys is most concerned.

The Power of the Victim.

A Study of *Quartet*, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* and *Voyage in the Dark* by Jean Rhys

A sentence she had read somewhere floated fantastically into her mind: 'It's so nice to think that the little thing enjoys it too,' said the lady, watching her cat playing with a mouse.¹

It is easy to dismiss Jean Rhys's heroines as passive victims of men. Yet this passivity, so disturbing to the reader, is also a form of rebellion. Lacking the power to change their lives in a society which offered women without family or money few options, her women negate themselves. They say no not only to self-definition and an orderly life but to the bourgeois code, 'the soul-destroying middle' (p. 20). And it is with the soul, in particular the female soul, that Jean Rhys is most concerned.

Rhys's heroines suffer terrible humiliations but they share a moral victory. However pathetic her position, the Rhys heroine is at least no victim of guilt. She has relinquished what assertive power she may possess to her aggressor and thus remains on the side of the angels, those outsiders who refuse to cooperate with or who are victims of the establishment. In his introduction to *The Left Bank*, Rhys's first collection of short stories, Ford Madox Ford refers to Rhys's 'passion for stating the case of the underdog'. Indeed, the Rhys heroine identifies with those who inhabit the 'underworld' of London, Paris and the West Indies: the prostitute, the criminal, the artist and the blacks. In these sub-cultures she can escape at least temporarily from the Nobadaddy outside to a sensual landscape, the externalization of the female psyche.

The Rhys heroine is literally a born loser, her inherent weakness apparent in her face and body. Marya of *Quartet* has a short face, 'her

long eyes slanted upwards towards the temples and were gentle and oddly remote in expression' (p. 7). Early on in *Quartet*, Miss De Solla describes Marya as 'a decorative little person, decorative but strangely pathetic' (p. 8). Julia in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* has similar features: 'Her eyes gave her away. By her eyes and the deep circles under them, you saw that she was a dreamer, that she was vulnerable — too vulnerable ever to make a success of a career of chance.'² Julia's hands are 'slender, narrow palmed with very long fingers, like the hands of an oriental'. The typical Rhys heroine, small, physically fragile, languid and exotic in the English context, contrasts sharply with middle class women, particularly Englishwomen, who are described as strong, coarse, mannish. The Heidlers in *Quartet* are 'fresh, sturdy people' (p. 11); Lois Hidler has 'the voice of a well-educated young male' (p. 11). In that Lois Hidler and the others of her ilk have been coopted by the patriarchy, they have in a sense become men, with all the assumed strengths, and lack of grace and sensuality. For Rhys's dichotomy is not necessarily between men and women but between the powerful and the powerless.

The Rhys heroine has frequent bouts of sickness in large part because she cannot adjust to the English winters, a metaphor for the chill of that society. Anna, the heroine of *Voyage in the Dark*, suffers from cold hands and feet. Her friend remarks 'She's always cold. She can't help it. She was born in a hot place.'³ The delicate flower of a tropical island hothouse, transplanted to the frigid North, lacks even the physical defences necessary for survival.

That the battle for strength has been won from the outset, the Rhys heroine acknowledges through her passivity. Although Marya in *Quartet* senses the disaster ahead if she takes refuge with the Heidlers, she allows them and her unwitting husband to talk her into the move. Penniless, her husband in prison, Marya may have no choice, but she also feels too vulnerable to stand alone. Mr Mackenzie observes of Julia that she 'was a female without the instinct of self preservation' (p. 20). Although Julia is older and more of a fighter than either Marya or Anna, she is easily bullied by the forces of her ex-lover and his lawyer.

When she thought of the combinations of Mr Mackenzie and Maitre Legros, all sense of reality deserted her and it seemed to her that there were no limits at all to their joint powers of defeating and hurting her. Together the two perfectly represented organized society, in which she had no place and against which she had not a dog's chance. (p. 17)

Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* is defeated by a similar pair of men, her lover Walter Jeffries and his cruel friend Vincent. Anna, younger and more

naive than Julia, is only dimly aware of the powers which will crush her. When she reveals to Vincent that she toured in a chorus in places like Southsea, Walter admonishes her: 'You shouldn't give yourself away like that' (p. 75).

When the inevitable happens and the Rhys heroine is left by her lover, she mourns by inaction, by retreating to her room, her drink, her memories. Successive landladies wonder at the young woman who stays in bed all day. 'The landlady thought to herself that it was extraordinary a life like that, not to be believed. Always alone in her bedroom. But it's the life of a dog' (*After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* p. 9). Even in good times Rhys's heroines spend most of their time sipping Pernods in cafes or lying in dingy hotel rooms brooding about past and present difficulties, fantasizing about beautiful clothes, food and lovers. They watch and judge but rarely engage others. Appropriately in these novels about passivity, the plot is minimal; interior monologue substitutes for action.

The Rhys heroine's professions — chorus girl, mannequin, model and even mistress — are ones in which she must be self-effacing. Her body is used to model clothes for someone else's body, as part of a backdrop for the star in a show, or as bait to catch men and satisfy their sexual demands. Yet these were the sort of choices available to unmarried women who were neither highly educated nor rich. And in a sense, these jobs parody the role of the married middle class woman who gains the security the Rhys heroine lacks by being a domestically 'decorative person'.

Appearance is thus of paramount importance to Rhys's heroines:

to stop making up would have been a confession of age and weariness.... It would have been the first step on the road that ended in looking like that woman on the floor above — a woman who had dyed hair which had grown out for two inches into a hideous pepper and salt grey. The woman had a humble, cringing manner. She had discovered that, having neither money nor virtue she had better be humble if she knew what was good for her. (*After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, p. 11)

Julia's terror at the thought of becoming this woman is evident in the obsessive way she makes up. Her lover thinks she looks furtive and calculating when she powders her face. Julia's makeup has become a mask, a weapon in a battle she is losing with age. When a young man who had been following her turns away because he sees how old she is, Julia is shattered. Julia's emotional and social deterioration is closely paralleled by a physical one; by the end of the novel she no longer cares what she looks like. 'Women go phut quite suddenly,' (p. 137) Mr Mackenzie observes when he sees how untidy Julia has become. Yet it was his

abandonment of Julia which led to her dissolution. She felt 'smashed up' (p. 37) by him and indeed when she was no longer useful to him, when physical attraction had turned to repulsion because of her emotional demands, Mr Mackenzie was compelled by cowardice to discard her.

The scenes of clothes purchasing are rituals in which the Rhys heroine conjures up a fantasy: 'This is the beginning. Out of this warm room that smells of fur I'll go to all the lovely places I've ever dreamed of' (*Voyage in the Dark*, p. 25)). The saleswoman, generally a neutral or vaguely sympathetic figure, participates in the crucial process of putting together an image. The heroine trembles with anxiety because the person she envisions becoming by wearing these new clothes is not real. Out of pleasure comes disillusionment and terror at having spent her money on clothes which will not after all provide decorative armour to do battle for lovers.

Money, the link between a successful image and the acquisition of a lover, figures largely in Rhys's novels. Rhys details the cost of her heroines' hotel rooms, clothes and food, the amounts of money these women receive from lovers. Yet her novels are hardly realistic in the Dreiser tradition; we know little about the social background or even the appearance of many of the male characters, and Rhys gives barely a hint of the social and political currents of the twenties and thirties. What we do know is that money is always intimately connected with the power men and at times women wield over the Rhys heroine. In that she rarely calculates how to make or save money, the Rhys heroine rejects this power for herself. Mr Mackenzie cannot bring himself to give Julia a lump sum because he knows she will spend it all at once.

Although several heroines drift towards prostitution, money and sex are more than just commodities to be exchanged. After Anna makes love with Walter Jeffries, she allows him to place money in her bag. 'I meant to say, «What are you doing?» But when I went up to him instead of saying, «Don't do that,» I said «All right, if you like — anything you like, any way you like.» And I kissed his hand' (*Voyage in the Dark*, pp. 33-4). At that moment Anna not only accepts Walter as her master, but ensures that she will be victimised. 'I felt miserable suddenly and utterly lost. «Why did I do that?» I thought' (p. 34). Why? Because Anna, the young, helpless virgin, regards this wealthy, older, patronising man as a father. He gives her money, enjoys her innocence; she becomes his little girl, admired and protected for a time. This father-daughter relationship is evident from the beginning of *Voyage in the Dark*, when Walter helps Anna during her illness. He takes over her life: he calls his doctor, brings food and medicine and manages Anna's cranky landlady. Even the diction

and syntax of Anna's thoughts about her affair with Walter have the fragmentation and simplicity of a child's mind:

But in the daytime it was all right. And when you'd had a drink you knew it was the best way to live in the world because anything might happen.... Dressing to go and meet him and coming out of the restaurant and the lights in the streets and getting into a taxi and when he kissed you in the taxi going there. (p. 64)

Marya and Julia engage in similar if much more subtle father-daughter relationships, the father at times a cold, punishing Nobadaddy. Since the Rhys heroine is really searching for fatherly affection in the guise of sex, the sexual act is always described in flat, curiously sexless terms: 'When he touched her she felt warm and secure, then weak and so desolate the tears came into her eyes' (*Quartet*, p. 57). For Marya, Heidler is the supreme Daddy; large, sturdy and somewhat obtuse, he distributes money and attention in an unpredictable way so that Marya feels a 'perpetual aching longing.... And the fear ... that the little she had would be taken away from her' (pp. 95-6). More than almost any male character in Rhys's novels, he personifies the power of the patriarchy:

Heidler sat in a big armchair near the stove opening his letters and when the last letter was read he unfolded the *Matin* and asked for more coffee. Marya always brought the cup and sugar for he was very majestic and paternal in a dressing-gown and it seemed natural that she should wait on him. He would thank her without looking at her and disappear behind the newspaper. He had abruptly become the remote impersonal male of the establishment. (p. 47)

Not only does Heidler claim the largest chair but he engages in the most important activities, those which connect him with the powerful establishment on the outside; he receives and reads letters and the newspaper.

In each of these three novels the heroine is defeated by a pair of oppressors who are, in a sense, surrogate parental figures; the one loves and seduces, the other punishes. The two together overwhelm the Rhys heroine who will always be the powerless child outside the adult realm. Yet there is another way to look at these relationships. Put in very crude terms, the triangle of Heidler, Lois Heidler and Marya is that of customer, pimp and prostitute. The prostitute is the social victim but never the moral one; it is her customer who debases himself and his sexuality by buying her body and affection. And the pimp, the parasite who feeds off of the sexual and material needs of the customer and prostitute is the real villain. The ultimate pimp in the Rhys universe is a woman like Lois who out of self interest joins forces with the patriarchy.

By procuring Marya for Heidler, Lois preserves her place in a marriage which is socially and economically necessary for her survival. When Marya tries to leave the Heidlrs, Lois thinks 'Oh, no, my girl, you won't go away. You'll stay here where I can keep an eye on you. It won't last long.... It can't last long. I've always let him alone and given him what he wanted and it's never failed me' (p. 64).

The Rhys heroine emerges from these relationships comparatively guiltless, a position which she makes use of. When at the end of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Julia abruptly asks Mr Mackenzie for a hundred francs, she destroys any romantic illusions he had about himself on seeing her again; she reminds him that not only was their past relationship based on money, but that he of course was the crass one. She was merely trying to survive.

At times one feels that the Rhys heroine enjoys her position not only because it confers moral superiority but because she longs to be possessed. Gifts of money may be humiliating, but they are also comforting because they establish without a doubt the relationship between possessor and possessed. Paradoxically it is easier for Julia to take risks, to feel free when in the power of a lover.

By touching bottom, economically, socially, and emotionally, the Rhys heroine joins a class of social misfits, those who haven't even the veneer of respectability, the protection of money and class, or the assumed racial or sexual superiority. Rhys clearly sympathises with these underdogs, for her heroines feel most comfortable, most at ease in their presence. Marya lives quite contentedly with her husband Zelli, who turns out to be a thief. When the two of them have money, they spend it extravagantly; when they are broke, they live on cheap white wine. The middle class Heidlrs are repulsed by Zelli's reckless approach to life, his underworld connections, his imprisonment.

Anne remembers how, when she lived in the West Indies, she wished to be black, the exploited race, a vibrant subculture on an island ruled by European whites. For Anna, the blacks represent warmth, exoticism and a kind of innocence. Like Zelli they live in the present, heedless of middle class virtues of thrift and order. Yet Rhys is too intelligent a writer to define the black culture or her heroines as simple children or primitives. They are children only in their powerlessness and their rejection of what they see as a hypocritical white middle class code.

Early on in *Quartet*, Rhys connects Marya's condition as a victim with the seedy side of Parisian life through a juxtaposition of short descriptions of Montparnasse backstreets with observations on the English middle class. Marya visits Miss De Solla, an expatriate herself and somewhat of

an outsider since she is a lone woman, an artist and a Jew. Miss De Solla observes that the English 'touch life with gloves on' (p. 9). The English in Rhys's world represent everything antithetical to sensuality and joy. Miss De Solla continues to talk about the English, but Marya's attention is drawn to music coming from the street and her mind wanders: 'Listening to it gave Marya the same feeling of melancholy pleasure as she had when walking along the shadowed side of one of those narrow streets full of shabby parfumeries, second-hand bookstalls, cheap hat shops, bars frequented by gaily painted ladies and loud voiced men, midwives premises' (p. 9). This is a woman-centred world, the words 'narrow' and 'shadowed' suggesting its limited and marginal nature. Even the description which follows of a homosexual cafe which Marya discovered on one of these streets partakes of the same atmosphere. 'There was no *patronne* but the *patron* was beautifully made up. Crimson was where crimson should be, and rose colour where rose-colour.... The room was full of men in caps who bawled intimacies at each other' (p. 9). In these homosexual and female subcultures, there is none of the fear of intimacy and sexuality, and the consequent voyeurism which Marya encounters in the English. Later on in the same chapter, when Marya meets Lois Heidler for the first time, the contrast between the two cultures becomes even clearer. Lois's comment, 'H.J. and I have quite made up our minds that eating is the greatest pleasure in life' (p. 12), like her later categorisations of people and her art, is that of a dilettante and a voyeur. By reducing people to types, and regulating and even idealising sensuality, Lois Heidler does indeed 'touch life with gloves on'.

In *Voyage in the Dark*, set entirely in London, Anna's memories of her West Indian childhood become the attractive netherworld. In this novel, written after *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Rhys had more distance in terms of time from her heroine, a younger, less battered version of Julia or Marya. Nostalgia for the West Indies and a lost childhood which would have figured largely in Rhys's memories of her first years in England permeate the novel.

Voyage in the Dark begins with a comparison of the West Indies and England, those two realities which can never be reconciled for Anna. She recalls the West Indies in sensual terms. These passages, like those in *Quartet* about Montparnasse backstreets, detail the tremendous variety of life: the differences in smells, the catalogue of spices and sweets sold in the market, the extremes of colour in the sea and sky. Whereas in England everything looks the same: 'You were perpetually moving to another place which was perpetually the same' (p. 8). Anna's memory of the West Indies is more vivid than her vision of London although both

are written of in the past and that of the West Indies in the more distant past. England and her life there is like a hazy dream.

Yet even in the West Indies, her home, Anna is in limbo between the politically dominant white middle class society which she rejects, and the black culture which is so attractive but ultimately closed to her. To be black is to be close to the warmth, the heart of life. The black women Anna remembers have grace, pride and magical powers; they are not the weak, insolent creatures Anna meets in England who seem so much at the mercy of men. Francine, Anna's black friend and the family servant, is probably the only sympathetic woman in the novel. She takes care of Anna when she is ill and when she menstruates for the first time: 'it was she who explained to me, so that it seemed quite all right and I thought it was all in the day's work like eating and drinking' (p. 59). But as the novel progresses, these positive memories become infected with the fear of entrapment and a sense of exile. Anna remembers the lists of slaves they found in the old mansion and in particular, the name of a female slave, age 18, Anna's age. Later on Anna thinks of Francine working in the stifling kitchen. 'But I know that of course she disliked me too because I was white; and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white' (p. 62). At the end of the novel, Anna's dream while she is having an abortion is a kind of summing up of these anxieties. She is watching a masquerade in which blacks, hidden behind pink masks and white powder taunt their oppressors. At the end of the dream, Anna rides from the streets to the savannah and finally to 'a place where nobody is a place full of stones where nobody is' (p. 158). The colourful images have become shadows. This, Anna's last memory about the West Indies in the novel, is profoundly different in its tone from the first. The conflict between whites and blacks is ominous and Anna's place is very much outside both worlds. Hence the last words of the novel 'about starting all over again' (p. 159) in the context of an abortion signify more than just a pathetic hope and an ironic authorial commentary. In that Anna can no longer depend on her netherworld or her fatherly lover, and the two are jumbled up in this last dream, for emotional or material sustenance, the child killed within her is her childhood and innocence; she 'starts again' as an adult.

Rhys's usual austere style in which description is kept to a minimum and the reality outside the heroine's mind is a rapid counterpoint of conversation and action, changes when she describes the black culture of the West Indies or the back streets of Montparnasse. Passages are laden with detail; sentences trail with modifiers. The characters and the author herself, in a sense, allow themselves pleasure in these passages. Because

of her position in society the Rhys heroine has earned the close acquaintance and the delight of these streets, marketplaces, these lovely, lowly women. In *Quartet* and *Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, these passages seem like aberrations from the normal Rhys style; in *Voyage in the Dark*, these aberrations become more frequent and constitute an alternative reality for the heroine. In the two later novels, *Good Morning Midnight* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the contrast between the two styles, the two realities becomes the main focus.

NOTES

1. Jean Rhys, *Quartet* (Chatto & Windus, 1928; Penguin Books, 1973), p. 49. Further references to the Penguin edition are given after quotations in the text.
2. Jean Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (Jonathan Cape, 1930; Penguin Books, 1971), p. 11. Further references to the Penguin edition are given after quotations in the text.
3. Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (Constable, 1934; Penguin Books, 1969), p. 12. Further references to the Penguin edition are given after quotations in the text.